

Study No.16 Ecclesiastes



Timeframe of events:

c.940 B.C.

Summary:

“Ecclesiastes” is a Greek noun. The original Hebrew word, *Qoheleth*, means something like “Assembler”, “Collector”, “Collator”, etc., but is often translated in English texts as either “Preacher” or “Teacher”. It is a collection of musings written by Solomon, and most likely addressed to a young man under his guidance (note 11:9; 12:12 and that the word “you” is in the singular in the original Hebrew text, e.g. 5:1; 7:10, etc.).

Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of a wise man undertaking a quest to understand and comprehend human life and activity “under the sun” (i.e. here on earth). He concludes that most things that seem important to us here and now are only transitory and often quite futile. Human existence and activity only have valid purpose and meaning when consistent with a fear or respect of God, and when a person looks to obey Him. Ultimately, these are the things that will continue to have meaning after our death.

Main Reading / Listening



Read and/or listen to the following passages at least once. Twice is better for taking it all in!

As a minimum, please read or listen to:

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 & 12:13,14.

To read or listen to the entire Bible systematically, this week’s passages are: (12 chapters in total)

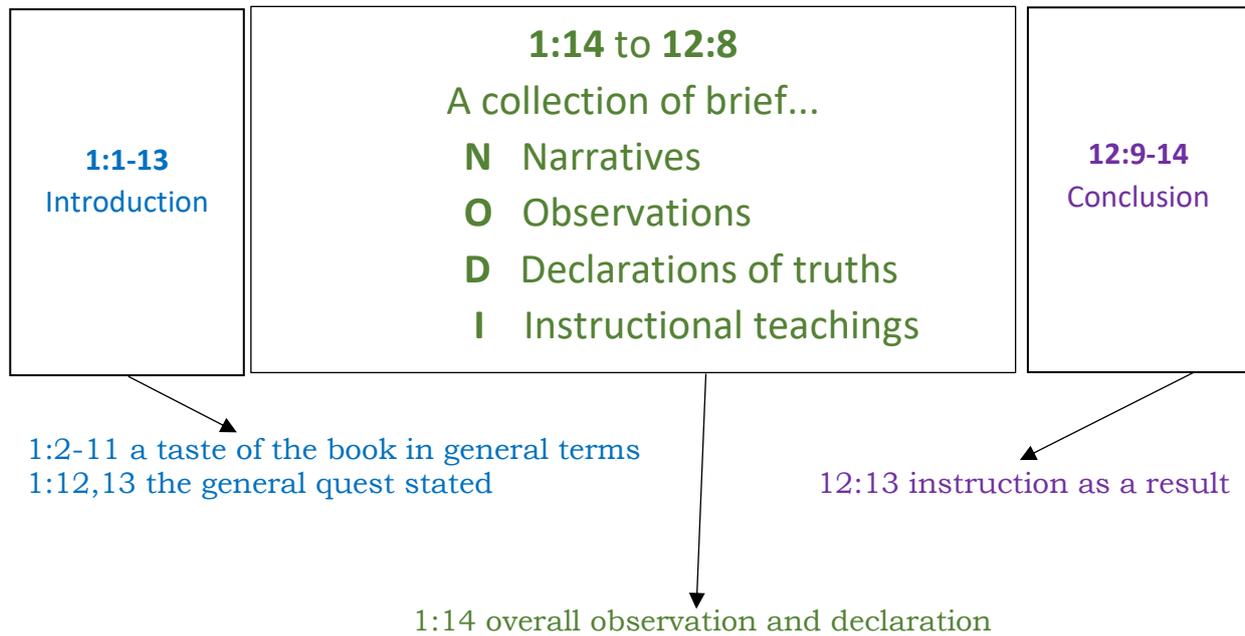
The book of Ecclesiastes.

(read in two different versions, if possible)

Relevant Charts:



BROAD STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES



The bulk of the book - 1:14 to 12:8 - is a series of narratives (mostly describing Solomon's quests), observations, truths declared and instructional advice. Not necessarily sequential, all of these relate to life and activity "under the sun".



Hints on reading Ecclesiastes . . .

Readers of Ecclesiastes often encounter two problems:

- (a) **Some verses seem to contradict each other** (e.g. 2:10,11 & 2:24).
- (b) **Some verses don't seem to fit in with what we might call the "Christian" message** (e.g. compare 8:15 with 1 Corinthians 15:31,32).

Observing the two hints below should help to address these problems.

1st HINT: Observe the context.



- (1) Keep in mind the basic premise of this book - the **quest** to understand human life and activity (1:13).
- (2) Keep in mind the final **conclusion** – “Fear God and obey His commandments” (12:13).
- (3) Keep in mind the **dispensation** of the Mosaic Law in place over Israel at the time, especially the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28 (e.g. prosperity, etc. for obedience to God; poverty, etc. for disobedience).

2nd HINT: Be aware of what is happening grammatically.

The suggestion to observe some grammatical features may sound uninteresting and irrelevant, but it will almost certainly help you to read and understand the message of this book.

- (1) Try to establish whether the verse or passage you are reading is:
 - (a) a **narrative**, mostly about Solomon's quest;
 - (b) an **observation**, something that Solomon observed;
 - (c) a **declaration** of a truth that Solomon either concluded as a result of his musings, or had learned some other way;
 - (d) an **instructional teaching** or piece of advice.

The detailed structure on page 4 may be of some help here.



- (2) Remember some basics about Hebrew **poetry**. The poetry sections in this book (often printed differently to prose in English Bibles):
 - (a) are written in this form to appeal to the reader's emotional side;
 - (b) usually take longer to convey a point;
 - (c) are written in pairs or groups of lines that rhyme in thought with each other.

(3) Note also that some sections in this book are much **shorter** than your edition of the Bible probably suggests. For example, at 9:13-10:20, many Bibles have a section heading (not part of the inspired text) saying something like “Wisdom is better than folly”. Compare this with the detailed structure on page 4, showing that there are actually several different thoughts being conveyed in 9:13-10:20 – and not all of them are covered adequately by that section heading.

(4) Note that the bulk of the book (1:14 to 12:8) is **not sequential**. It is not one long argument that develops. Rather, it is a collection of thoughts that are bound by comments in the introduction (1:13,14) and the conclusion (12:13,14).

* * * * * **ECCLESIASTES – A DETAILED STRUCTURE** * * * * *

INTRODUCTION (1:1-13)

1:1 Introduction
 1:2-8 Observations and declarations about the never-ending and unsatisfied pursuits of humanity
 1:9-11 Declaration about life ever since creation
 1:12,13 Narrative about the quest to understand human life and activity in this life

COLLECTION OF BRIEF NARRATIVES, OBSERVATIONS, DECLARATIONS AND TEACHINGS (1:14-12:8)

1:14,15 Declaration about life in general
 1:16-18 Observation and declaration about wisdom and folly
 2:1-10 Narrative - Quest regarding things that give pleasure during a person's lifetime. Solomon's own experience
 2:11 Observation about things that gave Solomon pleasure during his lifetime
 2:12-23 Narrative, observations and declarations about the wisdom and folly of a person leaving their earthly gains to their successor after one's own death
 2:24-26 Declaration about this life
 3:1-8 Observations about the proper times for things to happen
 3:9-15 Declarations about the work of humans in the context of God's workings
 3:16,17 Observation and declaration about righteousness and wickedness
 3:18-22 Observations and declarations about the death of all but God
 4:1-3 Observation and declaration about oppression in this life
 4:4-6 Observation and instruction about labour and its rewards
 4:7,8 Observation and declaration about a specific man's labour and his rewards
 4:9-12 Declaration about two and three companions / fellow workers
 4:13,14 Declaration about a foolish king
 4:15,16 Observation and declaration (prophecy?) about the king's successor
 5:1-5 Instruction about vows, and the sacrifices and payments accompanying them
 5:6-12 Instruction on various themes, in the form of proverbs
 5:13-17 Observation and declarations about possessions, and non-possession after death
 5:18-6:9 Observations about a person's enjoyment of the God-given fruits of hard work
 6:10-7:22 Declarations and instruction on various themes, in the form of proverbs

7:23,24 Narrative - quest for wisdom, to be incomplete
 7:25-29 Observations and declarations about a seductress
 8:1 Declaration about a wise person
 8:2-5a Declarations about a king's command
 8:5b-9a Declarations regarding time and judgement
 8:9b Declaration about ruling
 8:10-14 Observations and declarations about the wicked and the righteous
 8:15 Declaration about a pleasurable lifestyle
 8:16,17 Narrative – quest, observation and declaration that, despite great effort, a person cannot fathom all there is to know about life and activity on earth
 9:1 Narrative and declaration about a person not knowing their future (possibly including how God will deal with a person)
 9:2-6 Declarations that, however a person lives, their life ends with death
 9:7-10 Instructions to live as enjoyable a life as possible, knowing it will not last
 9:11,12 Observation and declaration that all humans face circumstances of chance, not necessarily reward
 9:13-15 Observation about wisdom, regardless of a person's power or status
 9:16-10:3 Declaration about wisdom, regardless of a person's power or status
 10:4 Instruction about wisdom, regardless of a person's power or status
 10:5-10 Observations about foolish rulers, and how human activity can be disorderly when a ruler is a fool
 10:11-14a Declarations about a fool's speech
 10:14b Declaration about the future
 10:15 Declaration about the labour of fools
 10:16-19 More observations about foolish rulers, and how human activity can be disorderly when a ruler is a fool
 10:20 Instruction about cursing the king
 11:1-6 Instructions and declarations regarding the value of making contingency plans
 11:7-12:7 Instructions to be mindful of God during youth, before it is too late to make it a habit
 12:8 Declaration reminding the reader that human life and activity is but a transitory mist

CONCLUSION (12:9-14)

12:9,10 Narrative regarding proverbs, instruction and Solomon's role as an instructor of wisdom
 12:11-14 Summary: Instruction regarding wisdom and human activity, in the context of fearing God

3 important phrases in Ecclesiastes:

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 1:14

“under the sun”

This phrase occurs about 30 times in the book. It refers to human existence and activity here during a person’s earthly lifetime.



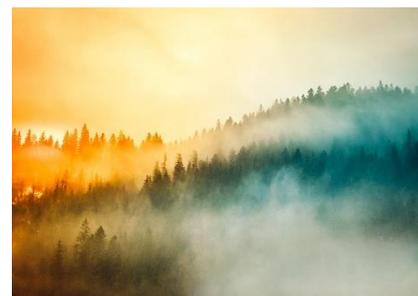
“vanity” / “meaningless”

The Hebrew word *hebel* is often translated “vanity” (e.g. in the KJV & NKJV) or “meaningless” (e.g. NIV) in English Bibles. Stated almost 30 times in the book, this may lead us to think that Ecclesiastes is a book of despair.



However, a more accurate translation of *hebel* is something like **vapour, breath** or **mist**, as in the pictures on this page. The phenomena described in the book as vapour (a) are transitory - here for a while, but soon gone, (b) are of lesser substance than they appear to be, and (c) obscure the really substantial and lasting things in this universe.

When Solomon makes a statement like “all is vanity” or “all is meaningless” (e.g. 1:14), what is being said is something like, “all is vapour/mist”. It is transitory, of little substance and it obscures the really important things associated with our existence. This is not a book of despair, but rather a “telling it like it is”.



“grasping for the wind” / “chasing after the wind”

Occurring nine times, this phrase indicates a futile exercise.



**Consider and discuss
the following questions:**



- (1) What does the word Ecclesiastes mean?
- (2) How does the book of Ecclesiastes differ from the apocryphal book with the similar-sounding title - "Ecclesiasticus"?
- (3) How is Solomon associated with this book? (1:1,12-14,16; 2:4-9)
- (4) Who was the Preacher (KJV, NKJV), also known as the Teacher (e.g. NIV)? 1:1,12
- (5) What is the meant by the phrase in 1:2 - "Vanity of vanities" (NIV: "Everything is meaningless")? Is everything in life really meaningless, or done in vain?
- (6) What is the Hebrew word for vanity / meaningless? How does translating it as "vapour" give 1:2 a different sense?
- (7) What is the main message of 1:3-11, especially in regard to the references about nature?
- (8) Written approximately 3000 years ago, is there really nothing "new under the sun" (1:9,10) today? What about cars, mobile phones, modern medical procedures, etc.?
- (9) In what ways does the teaching of Ecclesiastes overlap many of the sayings in the book of Proverbs?
- (10) A common phrase in this book is "grasping for the wind" (NIV: chasing after the wind). e.g. 1:14,17; 2:11, etc. What is meant by this phrase?
- (11) What did the Preacher set out to do? (1:13)
- (12) Broadly speaking, what did the Preacher observe and conclude, as a result? 1:14
- (13) Why would much wisdom and knowledge bring about sorrow and grief (1:18)? Does this contradict the many instructions in the book of Proverbs to seek wisdom and knowledge (e.g. Proverbs 1:2-7; 15:14; 18:15; etc.)? Give reasons for your answer.

(14) How did the Preacher view his earthly riches and comforts upon reflection (2:1-11)? Is this view contradicted in 2:24,25; 3:12,13 and 5:18-20? Give reasons for your answer.

(15) According to 2:15, in what sense are wise and foolish people similar?

(16) According to 2:17-23, why did the Preacher hate life?

(17) Does the principle set out in 2:26 happen today? Give reasons for your answer.

(18) What is the point of the "A time to..." passage in 3:1-8?

(19) How does the statement about time in 3:17 fit in to the theme of the book?

(20) In what way are humans and animals alike, according to 3:18-21?

(21) 3:21 speaks about a person's spirit. (a) Is 3:21 saying that a person's soul goes to heaven to live on after death? (b) If so, why does 9:5,10 indicate an absence of life and consciousness after death? (c) If not, what does 3:21 mean?

(22) How does the conclusion of 3:22 relate to 3:20?

(23) Is the edict that it is better not to have been born (4:3) a true Biblical statement? Give reasons for your answer.

(24) The edicts of Ecclesiastes 4:6 and Proverbs 17:1 have a similar message. What is it?

(25) Who is/was the man all alone in 4:8?

(26) What is the message of 4:7,8?

(27) In what way is 4:9-11 like a passage from the book of Proverbs?

(28) How is 4:12-16 reminiscent of Kings Saul and David?

(29) How is 5:1-7 related to vows and sacrifices under the Mosaic Law? Cp Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Numbers 30.

(30) How is the statement of 5:15,16 seen in the following passages: Job 1:21; Psalms 49:16,17; Luke 12:16-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-8? What is the essential message behind each of these?

(31) Is the Preacher's finding in 5:18-20 too materialistic? Give reasons for your answer. Cp 8:15

(32) Chapter 6 speaks of the experience of life in the context of a person's death. Do you agree with the conclusions set forth? Give reasons for your answer.

(33) 6:1,2 speaks of a situation where a "foreigner" (NIV reads "strangers", but the Hebrew word primarily relates to a person from another land) consumes a person's bounty that was provided by God. (a) Put this situation into your own words. (b) How would this situation have come about? (c) What was so "evil" about such a situation?

(34) Summarise 6:3-6 in your own words. Do you agree with the Preacher's conclusion? Why or why not?

(35) What is the gist of 6:7-9?

(36) What is meant by "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire" (6:9)?

(37) In what way is the section in 6:10-7:22 like passages in the book of Proverbs?

(38) What is the teaching of 7:13,14?

(39) What does it mean to be "overly righteous" (7:16), and why would this not be a good thing?

(40) Compare 7:20 with Romans 3:23. What is the similar theme?

(41) How is Ecclesiastes 7:26 described in more detail in Proverbs 5:1-23?

(42) Why would wisdom make a person's face shine (8:1)? Cp Proverbs 3:13

(43) The Hebrew word *ruach* in 8:8 is translated as "spirit" in the KJV/NKJV and "wind" in the NIV. Which of these do you think is correct? Give your answer after considering the context of the surrounding verses.

(44) Compare the passage in 8:10-14 with Proverbs 3:1,2; 10:27; 28:16. What do you think the Biblical teaching is about the length of one's life, according to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes?

(45) Ecclesiastes 8:15, 1 Corinthians 15:32 and Isaiah 22:13 each contain a similar phrase. (a) What is this phrase? (b) In what context does it appear in each of these verses? (c) Is this phrase a truth for all time?

(46) Compare 8:16,17 with Proverbs 3:5. What is the similar theme?

- (47) What does 9:2,3a say about the fate of all humans? Does this include people such as those described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18?
- (48) What do the words of 9:5,10 say about life after death? How does this compare with traditional views of what happens to a person's soul after death?
- (49) What do you think of the exhortation in 9:7-10 for a person to live their life as enjoyably as possible, knowing that this life will not last?
- (50) Do you agree that "time and chance" happen to all people (9:11,12)? Give reasons for your answer.
- (51) According to 9:16-10:4, what is the place of wisdom, regardless of a person's power or status?
- (52) How can human activity become disorderly when a ruler is a fool? (10:5-10)
- (53) Why would it be ill-advised to speak or even think evil against a king, according to 10:20?
- (54) 11:1-6 speaks of the value of making contingency plans. (a) What is a contingency plan? (b) Compare 11:1,2 in the KJV/NKJV with the NIV. What is the different message in each of these translations?
- (55) 11:7-12:7 exhorts the reader to be mindful of God while still in their youth. Generally speaking, what reason is given for this exhortation?
- (56) Each verse in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 relates to some aspect of the book Proverbs, either in a general sense, or as a repeated edict. Try to identify this connection in each of those verses.
- (57) 12:13,14 is a summary of the Preacher's message. (a) What is the main instruction for the reader? (b) What is the reasoning for this instruction? (c) What similarity is there between Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 and Colossians 3:23-25?